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ABSTRACT

Although certain features have been identified as most indicative of "syntactic maturity," these only partially answer the question, "What is mature writing?" Mature thought on the part of the author is reflected in writing in the following ways: recognizing that the audience is different from himself or herself; providing an appropriate context for his or her statements; basing his or her arguments on values the audience is likely to share; trying to anticipate and respond to objections or questions the audience is likely to have; recognizing the legitimacy as well as the limitations of other points of view on a given subject; acknowledging, where appropriate, the limitations of his or her own point of view; indicating what the viewpoint cannot explain; taking note of apparently contradictory evidence; and recognizing the complexity of the subject at hand by attending to more than one feature of an experience. Suggestions for evaluating writing include the following: conclusions from single pieces of writing must be made with care; nonegocentric writing must not be equated with impersonal, bland prose; recognizing egocentrism in writing is not straightforwardly simple; and definitions of mature writing may vary with the type of writing one is doing. (DF)

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Redefining "Mature Writing"

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A little more than a decade ago, Francis Christensen set us thinking about a question that seems particularly appropriate now that so many people are concerned about writing and the teaching of writing. The question is this: What do we mean by "mature" writing? Obviously, this question is important; our answer to it will determine how we go about teaching, evaluating, and doing research in writing. What is less obvious -- since we are energetically going about the business of teaching, evaluating, and doing research -- is that we still do not have a good answer to the question.

We do have some well-documented answers about the development of "mature" syntax. Particularly through the work of Kellogg Hunt, we know a great deal about the ages at which writers are likely to begin using a given syntactic structure. And we know which features of syntax are most indicative of "syntactic fluency" or "syntactic maturity." That is, we have a good notion about the syntactic patterns one is likely to encounter in the work of adult writers -- both professional and non-professional. This information about syntax (as provided by Hunt, 1965; Christensen, 1967; and others) has implied one definition of maturity in writing, a definition which has influenced teaching, research and evaluation. But useful as this definition is, it is troublesome because it is uninformed by a theory-based definition of what constitutes a mature person. This view of growth in writing ability lacks a clear relationship to a theory of cognitive or personal development.

One of the first people to try to establish this relationship was James Moffett, who equates growth in writing ability with the

progression from a relatively egocentric state (in which one is able to address only limited audiences about only a few kinds of subjects) to a relatively decentered state (in which one is able to address a variety of audiences about a variety of subjects). Moffett's work has led to substantial improvements in the way writing is taught. And it has helped us understand the kinds of tasks a mature (i.e., relatively non-egocentric) writer should be able to perform. But Moffett does not help us identify the specific cognitive processes that are reflected in relatively egocentric writing or in relatively decentered writing. Thus even Moffett can lead us to make distinctions and overlook important similarities between pieces of writing. Consider, for example, the following two letters. The first appeared several years ago in the Ann Arbor (Michigan) News.

> To the University of Michigan -- so call Student body.
>
> What, if I may ask as a tax payer and a person who pays taxes to support a bunch of Hoods, beer slops, punks, and you name it U. of M. has it including the Commie Profs.
>
> I put (3) three sons through college and not one was a bunch of pigs like you birds...(rather, they are) men with good honest jobs, homes, & families. If even one of my son's had come home and said he was going to burn his draft card, I would have took him apart piece by piece, then stick him back together and he would have been glad to enlist then, and I would not have cared if he ever came back.

The second letter is excerpted from J. P. Marquand's novel The Late George Apley. The central character of the novel is addressing his son:

> Dear John: I suppose a father always writes advice to his son upon the important moment of his entering college and I am no exception. A large part of your future life will be influenced by what you do this next year. The habits and ties you form will be with you always. At least, they have been with me, and I want you to do the right thing. There is a great deal of talk about democracy. I thought there was

something in it once but now I am not so sure.

. . . .

Sometimes it seems to me that you are reticent in talking to your parents. You are making a great mistake, John, for I really think that I could be a good deal of help to you. I am still quite well-known around the Club, you know, and your first object must be to "make" the Club. I believe that everything else, even including your studies, should be secondary to this. You may call this a piece of worldly counsel but it is worthwhile. I don't know what I should have done in life without the club. When I leave Boston it is my shield. When I am in Boston it is one of my great diversions. The best people are always in it, the sort that you will understand and like. I once tried to understand a number of other people, but I am not so sure now that it was not a waste of time. Your own sort are the best friends and you will do well not to forget it.

Clearly, these letters are different in important ways. And our current notions of mature writing would let us readily point out these differences. The letters are, as Moffett would lead us to note, addressed to different audiences. George Apley's letter is addressed to a single, relatively well-known person whereas the other is addressed to a large group that the writer appears to have little direct knowledge of. Further, the "Dear John" letter is, by Hunt's definition, syntactically more mature. The mean T-unit length is greater (17 words per T-unit versus 16 words per T-unit in the letter to the University of Michigan student body) and the "Dear John" letter contains a greater number of nominative absolutes.

But despite these differences, it seems to me that the two pieces are similar in important ways and that our usual notions of maturity do not lead us to see or be concerned about these similarities. For example, both writers concern themselves solely with their own values and feelings. And both assume that the audience shares (or should share) those feelings. Certainly neither writer

appears to have considered such questions as these:

How does my audience feel about the subject at hand?

How does my audience feel about me?

How are my audience's feelings/values/experiences different from mine?

What justification might my audience have for those feelings/values?

What kind of arguments might my audience see as persuasive?

Moreover, both writers have a very simple view of the world.

There are only two classes of people:

those who are in the Club/those who are not

those who are hoods and beer slops/those who have good honest jobs

There is only one acceptable way to act: join the Club/join the army

The consequences of actions are very uncomplicated and inevitable: if the writer's son joins the Club, all will be well; if the writer's son burns a draft card, then the only recourse is physical punishment and that punishment will inevitably have only one result -- the son will be "glad" to enlist in the army.

We may acknowledge that the "taxpayer and a person who pays taxes" may have derived some therapeutic benefit from his letter to the University of Michigan "so-call student body." And conceivably there are audiences for whom each letter might be effective. But whatever else we may say about these two writers, the thinking reflected in their letters seems terribly egocentric. Other people (i.e., their sons) exist chiefly to do as the writer instructs. Other points of view virtually do not exist; certainly, neither writer takes any serious account of values, experiences, feelings other than his own. Furthermore, at least for this particular piece

of writing, each writer assumes there is only one way to view the subject at hand, and each writer assumes there is no particular need to accommodate the needs/interests/values of his audience. In this implicit definition of egocentricity, I am obviously drawing not only on these letters but also on the work of Jean Piaget (1968), who would appear to have described both of these writers in his comments on children's egocentrism. A child, says Piaget, is likely to display "an egocentric attitude, in which the incorporation of objects into his own activity prevailed over accommodation (remodification of behavior as a result of experience" (p. 18). "Rather than extricating himself from his own point of view in order to coordinate it with the viewpoints of others, the child remains unconsciously centered on himself" (p. 21). Further, Piaget notes, young children are likely to have a very simple view of reality; they tend to focus on only one aspect of an experience. (We may think of Piaget's experiments in which young children insisted that the amount of water changed when transferred from one container to another simply because the children focused solely on one aspect of a container -- height, say -- and ignored others -- e.g., diameter -- that would contradict or modify the child's initial perception.)

These references to Piaget's work raise at least two issues. The first is that Piaget has been concerned with children's thinking about relatively impersonal phenomena. He has not dealt with the development of children's ability to examine their feelings and values. Further, Piaget has worked with relatively young children, whereas many English teachers must deal with adolescents and

adults. As to the first issue, I shall simply stipulate that cognitive activity includes the examination of personal feelings, values, and reactions as well as more impersonal phenomena. As to the second issue, we may take some encouragement from William Perry's study of undergraduates at Harvard College (1970). Put briefly, Perry found that many of these undergraduates had entered Harvard with a rather simplistic view of knowledge -- especially the knowledge they were to acquire in their college course work. Entering freshmen were likely to feel that their instructors had access to an authoritative, correct view of their subject matter. An instructor might present conflicting views or puzzling information to "make us think." But eventually, if one worked hard, he or she would come to understand that authoritative view. Somewhat later in their college careers, these students were likely to adopt a more relativistic stance: There is no "truth"; all views are equally good, so who are you to tell me what is right? By the time they had graduated from Harvard, it was not uncommon for students to come to a somewhat different philosophical position: Reality is complex; compelling alternative views exist. Yet one can weigh and assess these and make a reasoned judgment.

My first point, then, is that people can continue to develop cognitively, well into their adult years. People can change in their view of knowledge and, consequently, in the ways they think about experience, feelings, values, and ideas. My second point is that this development is important to one's growth as a writer. Indeed, I suspect that what often appear to be "Writing problems" may be cognitive problems; at least some

of these problems may appear because writers (at whatever age) have not learned to go beyond their egocentric, overly simple view of a subject or have not come to understand that their audience is someone who may not see the world as the writer does and who must, therefore, be accommodated in a variety of ways.

Although it is true that we never completely escape our own personal view of things, it is possible to recognize degrees of egocentricity in writing. To see my point, consider these two pieces of writing, done by eighth graders, in response to this assignment:

> The school board is considering setting up co-ed gym classes, so that -- in some sports at least -- boys and girls would be able to compete on equal terms. A woman has written a letter to the editor of the local paper claiming that co-ed gym is a bad idea and that most students are opposed to it. Write a letter to the school board in which you state your position on this matter and try to persuade them to accept your position.

One student wrote the following:

> Dear Editor,
>
> I disagree with the Lady. Its not fair to us girls that we have to miss out on some of the things that the boys do. It's not fair. Us girls want to show the boys that were every bit as good as the boys. I think if we want to do this they have to give us a chance by having the girls and boys doing the same on the Phyal fitness. Its not fair I don't think for the boys to do more than we do. But if they want coed than have it all coed instead of spliting classes up when it comes to contact sports. Girls can play contact sports to can't they. Give us a chance!

Another student wrote this:

> Dear Editor,
>
> Last night in the Tonawanda news paper I read a letter from a parent saying she thinks it is a bad mistake for boys and girls to be together in the same gym class. She also said she bets all the students at the Junior High feel the same way she does.

> I disagree with her because I feel the girls will try harder to keep up with the boys and so be more phsically fit. Also, the girls have the oppertunity to compete against some fine athletes and learn more. If we have to have coed gym and swimming it should be all coed even in contact sports. I also think we should have a say in what we want to do, not wha* other people make us do.
>
> The End

The thinking reflected in the first letter seems somewhat more egocentric than does the thinking reflected in the second. The first writer assumes that the reader has the same knowledge she does (i.e., that the reader has read the previous letter) and can call it to mind with little prompting from her (the only cue she gives is the capital L in Lady). The second writer, by contrast, makes no such assumption. She paraphrases, accurately, the main points advanced by the person she is arguing with. By doing so, she provides a context for her views, a context that her assigned audience might not otherwise be aware of.

Another way in which the first writer seems egocentric is that she simply asserts her value judgment ("it's not fair") and to justify that value judgment simply refers to what "us girls" want. Of course, that justification is persuasive only if one has the same values as "us girls" and if one is willing to make the rather simplistic assumption that getting what one wants is necessarily fair and desirable. The first writer also sets up a hypothetical sequence which allows for no alternatives, no deviation: "if we want to do this, they have [my italics] to give us a chance...." The second girl's argument is not a great deal more complex: If the girls have gym with the boys, they will (with no explicit exceptions or complications) learn more and become more physically fit. But at least this second writer presents an argument based on something other than her own personal wishes. Her basic as-

sumption, about the desirability of girls' being physically fit, could easily be shared even by someone who was not inclined to favor the specific program that "us girls" want.

This analysis lets me suggest some of the ways in which "mature" -- i.e., decentered -- thought might be reflected in writing. Recognizing that the audience is different from himself or herself, the writer:

1) provides an appropriate context for his/her statements;

2) bases his/her arguments on values the audience is likely to share.

Extrapolating from the negative examples of the "Dear John" and the "To the University of Michigan...." letters, one could speculate about other features of "mature" writing. This writing might show that an author trying to:

1) anticipate and respond to objections/questions the audience is likely to have;

2) recognize the legitimacy as well as the limitations of other points of view on a given subject;

3) acknowledge, where appropriate, the limitations of his/her own point of view, indicating what his/her theories can <u>not</u> explain, taking note of and trying to reconcile evidence that appears to contradict one's ideas or feelings.

4) recognize the complexity of the subject at hand, attending to more than one single feature of an experience,

As I shall suggest later in this article, this definition is, at best, limited. But I hope that my discussion thus far will let me justify this assertion: Since analysis of language may tell us something about a writer's cognitive processes, we may be able to base our definition of <u>mature writing</u> at least in part on

our understanding of mature thinking. My main concern in the rest of this article will be to identify ways in which all of us who teach writing can contribute to the redefinition of the term mature writing. Further, I shall try to show that our work can take the form of small-scale studies that will let us contribute to basic research in our field and, at the same time, get on with the day-to-day business of improving students' writing. But before describing these studies, I want to anticipate several problems that could misdirect and trivialize both teaching and research.

The first problem is that, as is always the case for researchers and teachers of writing, we must be careful about what we try to conclude from a single piece of writing. It does seem reasonable to try to determine whether a given piece of writing reflects relatively mature thought processes. As we identify some of these processes, we may be able to see more clearly how we can help students explore and convey their ideas more adequately. But it seems foolish to use our analysis of one or two pieces of writing to label a writer as egocentric. For one thing, a writer's performance can vary widely from task to task. People who think and write with some maturity in one context may not do so in other contexts. Moreover, labels -- all labels -- have ways of becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. Students have a way of meeting our expectations. If we say "Of course little Johnny can't write. He's still very egocentric, you know," we may find little Johnny does what we expect and persists in not learning to write.

Another problem is that one might be tempted to equate non-egocentric writing with impersonal, bland prose in which the writer never refers to him/herself, never takes a stand but, rather, continually acknowledges that "there are two sides to every issue" and concludes only that "there are no easy answers." In investigating cognitive maturity in writing, we must remember that the use of passive-expletive constructions or careful avoidance of first person pronouns can not hide the fact that all writing is produced by an I, a person whose feelings, values, and choices shape what is being said. Further, we must remember that even the most complex issues require writers to take a stand, make some personal commitment. The question for teachers and researchers alike is whether a writer's choices and commitments reflect a degree of mature thinking and perceiving about the subject at hand.

A third problem is that recognizing egocentrism in writing is not so straightforward a matter as is, say, computing mean T-unit length. In one rhetorical context, a feature of organization or content may suggest egocentricity and yet in another context may suggest relative maturity. This point is illustrated by two pieces of writing done by high school students of "average" ability. The first piece was written in response to this assignment:

> Write about a loss you experienced as a child. Tell what you lost and how you felt about the loss. Through your writing help your reader understand what the loss meant to you.

In talking about the loss of a prized toy, one student wrote:

> After saving my allowance for a couple months, I ventured to the local hobby shop to purchase a brand new Hot Wheels. The make of the toy was a Paddy Wagon. Alot of kids in school were involved in the same hobby I was, so I brought the toy to school. During our lunch period I took out the toy and was showing it around the table. After everyone had seen it I put it in my lunch bag. Forgetting the toy in my lunch bag, I threw the bag in the garbage as I was leaving the cafeteria to go to my class. When I got to my next class I realized what I did but it was a lost cause. The car toy was gone for good.

The second piece of writing was done in response to this assignment:

> Choose a place or object that you know very well and describe it so clearly that even someone who had never seen this place/object would be able to recognize it.

One student chose to write about "a little patch of woods, a half mile down the road from my Aunt's house, in South Carolina, where I used to sneak away to have cigarettes when I was younger."

> I would tell my mom I'm going for a walk and go out the door. I'de walk down the driveway, and take a right on the road. The walk is about half a mile long, or until a wooded section appears on the right hand side of the road. When you look to the right you see a path tracked in the red clay, leading upward into the woods. By simply following the path, through viny trees, and well spaced shrubs, you come to a fairly open area, about the size of a car. Lying on the ground, there should be about two hundred rotting cigarette butts. The woods are fairly thick, and if you're a kid it's a good place to sneak off to, because I never got caught.

Both of these pieces contain a good bit of personal narrative. Yet this narrative may suggest egocentricity in one but not in the other. In the piece about the loss of the car, the narrative -- admittedly not a very skillful or complex one -- provides a context that enables a reader to have some sense of what the toy meant to the student. This narrative suggests that the writer has some aware-

ness of the kind of information the audience will need if the writer is to accomplish his assigned purpose. By contrast, the second narrative seems to reflect much less awareness of the audience's needs. The narrative doesn't provide the information an audience would have to have in order to recognize the place the writer used to go to sneak a smoke.

A final closely-related problem in redefining mature writing may have to vary according to the kind of writing one is doing. Consider, for example, the following excerpt in which a student skillfully conveys the perceptions and reactions of a novice, out-of-condition hiker who is trying to keep up with a well-conditioned and apparently relentless hiking companion.

> The red pack bobbed ahead of me, always the same distance, always just out of reach, teasing me on. Only twenty minutes out and my lungs were burning. I swung my arms, loping up the trail like an orangutan, each hand in turn clutching for the invisible handle that would pull me on. "Tell me when you want to rest." "Ha!" I laughed back proudly and spent the next three minutes gasping to make up for that extra air I had wasted. Don't talk, just climb. Breathe. My breath came and went in fast, deep rasps. 7000'. I wasn't breathing. I was viciously sucking the air into me, as if through a pillow. I was a sieve, the air running through me, too thin to feel, gone and lost before I could soak it up. The slow ache from my chest creeped up, tightening around my throat. Couldn't swallow. No time. Just breathe. Teeth ached. "if I ever stop," I thought, "I'll never move again, I swear."

Earlier in this article, I listed a few of the qualities that might distinguish relatively mature writing from relatively egocentric writing. Clearly, "The Red Back Pack" does not display many of these qualities. For instance, nothing in the student's essay suggests that the writer has considered other points of view concerning her experience. She never, for example, makes any re-

ference to what the wearer of the red back pack might have thought about this experience. Indeed, the writer deals so extensively with her own perceptions that it would be easy to consider this narrative the product of very egocentric thinking. Yet I not only think this a very effective piece of writing but also believe it represents relatively complex, mature consideration of the experience. This relative maturity becomes apparent when we contrast this piece with another piece of personal experience expressive writing.[1]

> Yesterday, my boyfriend and I went to a big dance in Detroit. When we walked into the place, it was real noisy because everyone was talking and dancing. The dancing area was a lot bigger than most of the other ones I've seen, but the air was filled with smoke that would choke a horse. While looking around, my boyfriend noticed a few of his friends across the room, so we went over there, and he introduced them to me. They were the coolest guys! After talking a while with them, Fabian came up to me and asked me to dance. I just about died! I thought I was going to faint, but I pulled through. He's the most!

As do so many unsophisticated writers, the writer of this account deals in global, unexamined impressions: The friends were "the coolest guys"; Fabian was the "the most"; on meeting Fabian, the writer "just about died."

In fairness to this writer, we must acknowledge that reflecting upon our reactions and impressions is always difficult, especially when we are convinced of the inherent, self-evident rightness of our impressions. But this reflection upon the self-evident, this attempt to break up a global impression by considering the varieties of detail that comprise the impression -- this is part of what separates the "red back pack" essay from the piece on the dance.

[1]My comments about expressive writing in this context reflect James Kinneavy's definition of the term rather than James Britton's. That is, I intend the term to refer to writing in which one articulates one's ideas and feelings in a deliberately crafted manner that is intended to make those ideas and feelings accessible to someone other than oneself.

The author of "The Red Back Pack" doesn't just say "this is awful' I hurt"; she focuses her attention on the diverse aspects of her experience: the burning of her lungs, the movements of her hands, the effort involved in breathing, the ache in her chest, throat, and teeth.

One reaction to these two essays is simply to note that one writer has used many more details than has the other. That, of course, is true. But such a reaction should not obscure the possibility that those details may be the product of a relatively mature thinking and perceiving process that is not apparent in the essay about the dance. Unlike the student who wrote about her reactions to a dance, the author of "The Red Back Pack" shifts the focus of her attention to different aspects of her experience and manages, thereby, to capture the richness and detail of her experience. Assuming that "The Red Back Pack" reflects relatively mature thinking, I want to reiterate a point I made earlier. It might be that we will have to modify our definition of cognitive maturity to suit the type of writing we are concerned with. Otherwise, our definition of "mature" persuasive wr ting migh not enable us to identify, say, mature personal experience writing.

I raise this problem, and those that precede it, because we have only begun the work of re-defining the term mature writing, and it seems best to proceed with some care. With this in mind, I want to propose several types of inquiry that may help us re-think our definition of mature writing.[2]

[2]For additional suggestions for research, see Loren S. Barritt and Barry M. Kroll's "Some Implications of Cognitive-Developmental Psychology for Research in Composing," in Research in Composing: Points of Departure, Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, editors. Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978.

One kind of study would require us to identify the "mind at work" in writing done by our own students. We might rely on a combination of theory and intuition to identify one group of writings that seem to reflect relatively mature thinking and another group that seem to reflect relatively immature thinking. We would then analyze this writing to see whether we could detect patterns of thought which appear in the one group but not in the other. This is essentially the procedure I have followed in discussing contrasting pieces of student writing earlier in this article. (For other approaches to this sort of analysis, see Odell, 1977; Ohmann, 1962.)

Instead of, or perhaps in addition to, analyzing the written products of our students, we might examine their composing process by having them "compose aloud" as they write. Several teachers and researchers (Emig, 1971; Flower and Hayes, forthcoming) have found that student writers can verbalize their thoughts, reactions, uncertainties as they write. Apparently, even very unsophisticated writers can give a useful report of their composing process. (Perl, 1977)

Whether analyzing pieces of student writing or transcripts of students' composing aloud, we might ask at least two kinds of questions:

1) Do students at one age level appear to use cognitive processes that are rarely or never used by students at another age?

2) Do some of these students display cognitive processes that are consistent with what psychologists (Flavell, 1977; Piaget, 1968) tell us about mature or immature thought?

Answers to these questions will help us understand how cognitive maturity (or immaturity) is reflected in students' writing. Moreover, these answers can guide our work with students. For example, I have already noted that one of the important processes reflected in the essay "The Red Back Pack" was a skillful shifting of focus. We have some basis (Goswami, 1979) for thinking that students can be taught to shift focus and thereby improve their descriptive writing. This evidence, combined with other studies that show we can influence the cognitive processes student writers engage in (Odell, 1974; Young and Koen, 1973), leads me to make this suggestion: as we identify the cognitive processes that are characteristic of our more mature student writers, we may be able to help less mature writers engage in those processes.

Another type of study would require us to assign writing tasks that we felt reasonably confident required a specific kind of cognitive maturity. For example, Carl Bereiter, et al (1979), recently conducted a study in which they assumed one aspect of cognitive maturity was the ability to re-formulate one's conclusion about a given set of facts, expanding and revising that conclusion so as to accommodate new information. Participants in the study were asked to describe what was going on in a picture, "a cartoon scene of classroom disorder: two children are having a pea shooter fight, another has just sat on a tack... and a large bee is flying out the window." Some of the participants were shown only the complete picture, but others were shown the picture in four successive "exposures," each exposure being designed so as to give a different impression of what was going on in the picture. For

example, the first exposure showed only one child in pain and a bee flying out a window. This exposure clearly allowed the interpretation that the bee had stung the child. Subsequent exposures gave slightly different impressions; not until the fourth exposure did participants see the full picture and, thereby, get the most comprehensive view of what was going on in the picture.

For Bereiter, et al, the important question in this study was: Do writers at different ages revise their initial impression so as to account for new information? That question is important to all of us since the act of writing about a complex piece of literature or exploring a challenging subject may require writers to re-examine and reformulate their initial impressions. Furthermore, the format of the experiment by Bereiter suggests ways we might combine classroom teaching and research. Assume, for example, that we want students to write about a character in a literary work -- Macbeth, let us say. We might ask students to read up to the point where, near the end of Act I, Lady Macbeth urges Macbeth to murder Duncan. In their reading students would identify all the statements that give some insight into Macbeth's character. Once students had identified those statements, we might ask students to free write about their initial impressions of the character Macbeth. We might have students repeat this process at several points during their reading of the play. Having completed this process of reading, note taking, and free writing, students would be in a position to write an essay about the character Macbeth. Their notes and free writing would serve as preparation for that essay. These same notes and free writings, combined with students' essays, could become the subject of our own research. In examining

the work of a small number of students, we might ask ourselves such questions as these:

> Which students seem most (or least) able to re-formulate their initial impressions?
>
> In what ways do their initial impressions change (or fail to change)?
>
> What difficulties do students have as they engage in this process? Can we use the work of more successful students to give direction to the work of less successful students?

By analyzing the work of small numbers of students we might add to our knowledge of the cognitive processes of students at a particular age level and, at the same time, see how we might modify our teaching so as to help all students at a particular grade level engage in more complex conceptual activity.

One final possiblity for research would be to examine the writing of adults, particularly those adults who are not professional writers but who frequently have to write as a part of their work in business or government. My own contacts with such writers suggest three pleasantly surprising conclusions: 1) many people do a great deal more writing than one might expect; 2) these writers are frequently willing to discuss their writing -- once they discover that we respect what they do and are not simply looking for "mistakes" in grammar, usage, etc; 3) many of these writers approach their writing with sophisticated strategies that suggest cognitive maturity. For example, in examining the letters, memos, etc. of a worker in a government agency, I realized that this worker had several rather different ways of asking people to do something. In one memo she had said " The Agency Director requested that I send you this form for completion." In other memos

and letters, her requests were likely to take different forms: "Perhaps you could...." or "Please send...." During an interview, I asked the worker how she came to say "The Agency Director requested...." rather than "Please fill out this form" or "Perhaps you could fill out this form." Her response:

> I suppose I could have said please complete this.... (pause) Do you know [the person her memo was addressed to] ? .... He's kind of abrupt. So he's just not the kind of person that you say "Please complete this" to; he's not that type. "The Agency Director requested...." that's all he needs.

A similar sense of her audience underlay her decision to say "Please" or "Perhaps you might," in other contexts. This awareness of audience also appeared in many of her other choices about what she would say or how she would say it. As the worker herself pointed out, she had learned to make her choices almost instinctively. She said she rarely sat down and carefully plotted her strategy before writing. Yet her writing makes it clear that she did in fact have different strategies and that her use of those strategies parallels her understanding of her audience. Her awareness of her audience and her sensitivity to the different needs of different audiences suggests a cognitive maturity that one might not find in the work of students or, perhaps, even in the writing of less experienced workers (c.f. Kroll, 1978).

Inevitably, we will find that adult, non-professional writers possess varying degrees of skill; their writing and their comments about their writing may reflect varying degrees of cognitive maturity. Indeed, we may find that a particular writer may exhibit more egocentrism in doing some writing tasks than in doing

others. Nevertheless, analysis of the thinking of adult writers provides one more way we can understand the relation between cognitive maturity and maturity of writing. And as we discover some of the conceptual processes that guide the writing of skillful adults, we may be able to teach our students to engage in those processes.

This last suggestion may make me seem to encourage teachers and researchers to ask a version of what Piaget has reportedly called "the American question": If we can identify some of the characteristics of "mature" thought, is there some way we can speed up the process of maturity, some way to train younger writers to avoid egocentrism altogether and make their writing display only those qualities one would expect to find in the work of older writers? Although I may seem to be treading a very fine line, I think we must avoid entrapping ourselves and our students in the implications of this question. For one thing, egocentrism appears to have its uses. Even very mature writers may, at some point in their composing process, find it helpful to be egocentric. For example, the free writing proposed by Peter Elbow (1973) may lead one to make intemperate or ill-considered statements that would not appear in a final draft. Yet that free writing, with all its potential for -- even encouragement of -- egocentrism, is for many writers a useful part of the attempt to understand what they wish to say about a given subject.

Another reason for being leery of "the American question" is that are limits, surely, to the demands we may place upon students at a given age level. At each stage of one's development, there

are important experiences that should not be bypassed. In other words, twelve year olds deserve a chance to be twelve year olds. Furthermore, egocentric language must have some uses -- otherwise children would stop throwing temper tantrums and professional reviewers of the arts would stop writing vituperative, polemical reviews. And we would stop reading those reviews.

But even while rejecting the implications of the "American question," I still wish to argue that all of our efforts to teach writing must be informed by our sense of what is possible for mature writers. As we explore the ways cognitive maturity is manifested in writing, we may find that what is possible and desirable may differ according to the particular group of writers or the type of writing we are working with. But as we identify the cognitive processes that are possible and desirable, we shall be able to expand our definition of "maturity" as it applies to writing. And in so doing, we may also assist our students (and perhaps ourselves) with the problem that is the theme of this conference, the problem of learning to write.

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